# DECISION RECORD

Decision: It is my decision to authorize the issuance of a ten year grazing lease to Regents of New Mexico University for Allotment #63004. The lease will be for 52 Aus active use with 13 Aus in temporary non-use at 1 00%FR from March 1 to the end of February. Any additional mitigation measures identified in the environmental impacts sections of the attached environmental assessment have been formulated into stipulations, terms and conditions. Any comments made to this proposed action were considered and any necessary changes have been incorporated into the environmental assessment.

The fundamentals of rangeland health are identified in 43 CFR §§4180.1 and pertain to watershed function, ecological processes, water quality and habitat for threatened and endangered species and other special status species. Based on the available data and professional judgement, the evaluation by this environmental assessment indicates that the conditions identified in the fundamentals of rangeland health exist on the allotment.

If you wish to protest this proposed decision in accordance with 43 CFR §§4160.2, you are allowed 15 days to do so in person or in writing to the authorized officer, after the receipt of this decision. In the absence of a protest, this proposed decision will become the final decision of the authorized officer without further notice, in accordance with 43 CFR 4160.3. Please be specific in your points of protest. A period of 30 days following receipt of the final decision, or 30 days after the date the proposed decision becomes final, is provided for filing an appeal and petition for the stay of the decision, for the purpose of a hearing before an Administrative Law Judge (43 CFR 4.470).

The appeal shall be filed with the office of the Field Office Manager, 2909 West Second, Roswell, NM, and must state clearly and concisely your specific points.

Signed by T. R. Kreager — 8/9/99
Assistant Field Manager — Date

**Environmental Assessment for Grazing Authorization**
**Allotment #63004**
**EA# NM-060-99-047**

Roswell Field Office
Bureau of Land Management
2909 West 2nd
Roswell, NM 88201

T1S R14E, T1N R 16E various sections

## I. Introduction

When authorizing livestock grazing on public range, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has historically relied on a land use plan and environmental impact statement to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). A recent decision by the Interior Board of Land Appeals, however, affirmed that the BLM must conduct a site-specific NEPA analysis before issuing a permit or lease to authorize livestock grazing. This environmental assessment fulfills the NEPA requirement by providing the necessary site-specific analysis of the effects of issuing a new grazing lease on allotment #63004. There are no projects planned for this allotment at this time. Any subsequent management activities will have a site specific analysis conducted at that time.

A. Purpose and Need for the Action

The purpose of issuing a new grazing lease would be to authorize livestock grazing on public range on allotment #63004. The lease would specify the types and levels of use authorized, and the terms and conditions of the authorization pursuant to 43 CFR §§4130.3, 4130.3-1, and 4130.3-2.

B. Conformance with Land Use Planning

The Roswell Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (October 1997) has been reviewed to determine if the proposed action conforms with the land use plan's Record of Decision as required by 43 CFR 1610.5-3. The proposed action is consistent with the RMP/EIS.

C. Relationships to Statutes, Regulations, or Other Plans

The proposed action and alternative is consistent with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (43 U.S.C. 1700 et seq.); the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 (43 U.S.C. 315 et seq.), as amended; the Clean Water Act (CWA)(33 U.S.C. 1251 et seq.), as amended; the Endangered Species Act (16 U.S.C.

1535 et seq.) as amended; the Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978 (43 U.S.C. 1901 et seq.); Executive Order 11988, Floodplain Management and Executive Order 11990, Protection of Wetlands.

## II. Proposed Action and Alternatives

### A. Proposed Action:

The proposed action is to authorize to the Regents of New Mexico State University a grazing lease on allotment #63004 for 65 Animal Units (AUs) at 100% federal range. Grazing will be authorized from March 1 thru the last day of February of each year. The class of livestock is cattle and/or sheep.

### B. No Permit authorization alternative:

This alternative would be not to issue a new grazing lease. There would be no livestock grazing authorized on public land.

**C. Preferred alternative:** The preferred alternative is to reduce the grazing lease from 65 AUs to 52 AUs at 100% Federal Range. Grazing will be authorized from March 1 thru the last day of February of each year. The class of livestock is cattle and/or sheep.

## III. Affected Environment

### A. General Setting

Allotment #63004 is located in Lincoln County, about 13 miles east of Corona, New Mexico. This allotment contains 2,840 acres of Federal land.

This allotment lies outside the Roswell Grazing District Boundary established subsequent to the Taylor Grazing Act, and it is classified as a Section 15 Grazing Lease. Normally, the permitted use on a Section 15 lease is established by the amount of forage produced on the public lands. Overall livestock numbers on the allotment are not set by the Bureau of Land Management. In southeastern New Mexico, this is due primarily to either the small amount of public land found within the allotment, or the public lands are situated in small or isolated tracts that can not be managed as efficiently as larger, well blocked tracts of public lands.

This allotment is located within the Grassland vegetative community as identified within the Roswell RMP. The distinguishing feature for the grassland community is that grass species typically comprises 75% or more of the potential plant community. Short-grass, mid-grass, and tall-grass species may be found within this community. The community also includes shrub, half-shrub, and forb species. The percentages of grasses, forbs, and shrubs actually found at a particular location will vary with recent weather factors and past resource uses.

The following resources or values are not present or would not be affected: Prime/Unique Farmland, ACEC's, Native American Religious Concerns, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Hazardous/Solid Wastes, Wetlands/Riparian Zones, Floodplains. Cultural inventory surveys would continue to be required for federal actions involving surface disturbing activities. The impact of the proposed action and alternatives to minority or low-income populations or communities has been considered and no significant impact is anticipated.

## B. Affected Resources

1. Soils: The soils present within this allotment belong to the following general mapping unit:

Pastura-Deama-Darvey: Very shallow, shallow, and very deep, well drained, nearly level to moderately sloping soils; on hills mesa sides, piedmonts, and valley sides.
For more information, refer to Soil Survey of Lincoln County, New Mexico.

There is a certain amount of erosion that occurs naturally in this vegetation community. High winds in the spring and high intensity thunderstorms are the primary agents of soil transportation.

2. Vegetation: This allotment is within the grassland vegetative community as identified in the Roswell Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (RMP/EIS). Vegetative communities managed by the Roswell Field Office are identified and explained in the RMP/EIS. Appendix 11 of the draft RMP/EIS describes the Desired Plant Community (DPC) concept and identifies the components of each community.

Vegetative monitoring was conducted on this allotment in 1983, 1987, 1993. The study locations on this allotment are in a Loamy CP-3, and a shallow CP-3 range site. Analysis of the monitoring data indicates range condition has declined from good (62.78) to fair (47.12). The forage yield monitoring method indicates a carrying capacity for the federal land on the allotment of 47 AU's. The range condition monitoring method indicates a carrying capacity of 37 AU's. An average of the forage yield, the range condition, and the actual use indicates a carrying capacity for the federal land on the allotment of 52 AU's. This monitoring data supports a reduction from 65 AU's to 52 AU's which is the preferred action. Copies of the monitoring data and the analysis of the data is available at the Roswell Field Office.

The following table summarizes monitoring data for the allotment:

| Monitoring Data Summary, Allotment Averages | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Grasses | Forbs | Shrubs | Trees | Litter | Bare Ground | Rocks |
| Percent composition of vegetative cover | 88.65 | 1.00 | 10.00 | 0.33 | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Percent Ground Cover | 27.31 | | 4.73 | | 16.96 | 42.86 | 8.64 |

3. Wildlife: This allotment is located within the Macho Wildlife Habitat Area (WHA). The Macho Habitat Management Plan (HMP) was completed in 1986, with the primary objective of providing suitable pronghorn antelope habitat within the WHA by maintaining current quality habitat areas and improving those habitats that are in poor or fair condition. A second objective is to improve the overall distribution of antelope where possible with cooperation of the permittee.

Game species occurring within the area include mule deer, mourning dove, and scaled quail. Raptors that utilize the area on a more seasonal basis include the Swainson's, red-tailed, and ferruginous hawks, American kestrel, and great-horned owl. Numerous passerine birds utilize the grassland areas due to the variety of grasses, forbs, and shrubs. The most common include the western meadowlark, mockingbird, horned lark, killdeer, loggerhead shrike, and vesper sparrow.

The warm prairie environment supports a large number of reptile species compared to higher elevations. The more common reptiles include the short-horned lizard, lesser earless lizard, eastern fence lizard, coachwhip, bullsnake, prairie rattlesnake, and western rattlesnake.

A general description of wildlife occupying or potentially utilizing the proposed action area and associated Habitat Management Areas refer to the Affected Environment Section (p. 3-62 to 3-71) of the Draft Roswell RMP/EIS (9/1984).

4. Threatened and Endangered Species: There are no known resident populations of threatened or endangered species on the allotment. A list of

federal threatened, endangered and candidate species reviewed for this EA can be found in Appendix 11 of the Roswell Approved RMP (AP11-2). Of the listed species, avian species such as the bald eagle and peregrine falcon may be observed in the general geographic area during migration or winter months. There are no known records of these species having occurred on the allotment. There are no designated critical habitat areas within the allotment.

5. Livestock Management: The latest license was for 65 AU's. As was stated earlier, the BLM does not normally set the total livestock numbers for a Section 15 lease. Actual numbers of livestock on the allotment will vary depending on resource and economic conditions as determined by the operator.

The grazing of the pastures with BLM land and the numbers of livestock in each pasture is dependent of weather conditions and the needs of the research programs ongoing at that time. Pastures are periodically deferred based on those needs. The current permittee acquired the allotment in 1988.

6.Visual Resources: The allotment is located within a Class IV Visual Resource Management areas. The Class IV means that contrasts may attract attention and be a dominant feature in the landscape in terms of scale. However, the changes should repeat the basic elements of the landscape.

7. Water Quality: No perennial surface water is found on federal land on this allotment. Small ephemeral drainages cross the allotment.

8. Air Quality: Air quality in the region is generally good. The allotment is in a Class II area for the Prevention of Significant Deterioration of air quality as defined in the federal Clean Air Act. Class II areas allow a moderate amount of air quality degradation.

9. Recreation: Recreation opportunities are limited in this grazing allotment because the public has limited physical access to public lands. The parcels of Public lands within this allotment are scattered. The public lands in this allotment have legal/physical access through state lands and/or county or state roads.

Recreation activities that may occur on these public lands are within this allotment are: hunting, sightseeing, Off Highway Vehicle Use, primitive camping, mountain biking, horseback riding and hiking. Due to the fact that pubic land boundaries are not marked adequately or identified by signs and/or fences the general recreationist is reluctant to use the public lands in fear of being trespassed. Off Highway Vehicle designations for public lands within this allotment are classified as "Limited" to existing roads and trails.

10. Cave/Karst: No known significant caves or karst features are known to exist on the public lands located within this allotment. This allotment is located in an area of high cave/karst potential. There will be no further discussion of this resource.

## IV. Environmental Impacts

### A. Impacts of the Proposed Action

1. Soils: Livestock remove the cover of standing vegetation and litter, and compact the soil by trampling. These effects can lead to reduced infiltration rates and increased runoff. The number of livestock to be licensed under the proposed action is in excess of the vegetative capacity. Reduced vegetative cover and increased runoff can result in higher erosion rates and soil losses, making it more difficult to produce forage and to protect the soil from further erosion.

2. Vegetation: Vegetative monitoring indicates that the number of livestock to be licensed under the proposed action is in excess of the carrying capacity of the federal land. Ecological condition and trend is expected to continue to decline under this alternative.

3. Wildlife: There would be an increased competition for vegetative resources between wildlife and livestock for this action when compared to the preferred action.

4. Threatened/Endangered Species: Livestock grazing, as a result of issuance of the grazing permit, may affect, but not likely adversely affect the bald eagle and peregrine falcon. Habitat for wintering bald eagles would not be negatively impacted by livestock grazing since there is no presence of riparian and aquatic habitats nearby, and no active or suitable nesting habitat. Positive impacts may result to the bald eagle from the proposed action by increasing the amount of carrion during the late winter and early spring on those allotments which run sheep.

5. Livestock Management: There would be no change in livestock management from the current situation.

6. Visual Resources: The continued grazing of livestock would not affect the form or color of the landscape.

7. Water Quality : There would be no change in water quality from the current situation.

8. Air Quality: Dust levels under the proposed action would be slightly higher than under the no grazing alternative due to allotment management activities. The levels would still be within the limits allowed in a Class II area for the Prevention of Significant Deterioration of air quality.

9. Recreation: Grazing should have little or no affect on the recreational opportunities in this allotment. Recreation activities that could occur within this grazing allotment are limited or non-existent due to land patterns and the inadequate marking of public land boundary lines.

**B. Impacts of the No Livestock Grazing Alternative.**

1. Soils: Soil compaction would be reduced on the allotment around old trails and drinking troughs and there would be a small reduction in soil loss on the allotment.

2. Vegetation: It is expected that the number of plant species found within the allotment will remain the same, however, there would be small changes in the relative percentages of these species. Vegetation will continue to be utilized by wildlife. There would be an increase in the amount of standing vegetation.

3. Wildlife: Wildlife would have no competition with livestock for forage and cover. There would be no maintenance of livestock waters. As these waters became inoperable, water availability could become a critical limiting factor for many wildlife species.

4. T&E Species: There would be no change in the impacts on the Bald Eagle or peregrine falcon from the existing situation.

5. Livestock management: The forage from public land would be unavailable for use by the permittee. This would have a significant adverse economic impact to the livestock operation. The checkerboard land status on the allotment makes it economically unfeasible to fence out the federal land and use only the private land. It would become uneconomical for the permittee to continue in the agricultural business.

6. Visual Resources: There would be no change in the visual resources.

7. Water Quality: There could be a slight improvement in water quality due to the minor reductions in sediment loading during stormflow.

8. Air Quality: There would be a slightly less dust under this under this alternative versus the proposed alternative, but this would be negligible when considering all sources of dust.

9. Recreation: There would be no change in impacts to recreation from the existing situation since land status patterns would remain the same.

**C. Impacts of the Preferred alternative:**

1. Soils: By matching the licensed livestock numbers to the vegetative carrying capacity, adequate vegetative cover would be maintained on the soil. Soil compaction and excessive vegetative use will occur at small, localized areas such as drinking locations, along trails and at bedding areas. Positive affects from the preferred action include the speeding up of the nutrient cycling process and chipping of the soil crust by hoof action.

2. Vegetation:. Vegetation will continue to be grazed and trampled by domestic livestock as well as other herbivores. The area has been grazed by livestock since the early part of the 1900's, if not longer. Vegetative cover and biodiversity is expected to improve if this alternative is selected.

3. Wildlife: Wildlife will continue to utilize vegetative resources needed by a variety of wildlife species for life history functions within this allotment. The magnitude of livestock grazing impacts on wildlife is dependent upon the species of wildlife being considered, and it's habitat needs. In general, livestock stocking rate adjustments have been made in the past to minimize the direct competition for those vegetative resources needed by a variety of wildlife species. Cover habitat for wildlife will remain the same as the existing situation.. Maintenance and availability of existing waterings will continue to prove a dependable water source for wildlife, as well as livestock.

4. Threatened/Endangered Species: There would be no change to this resource under this alternative.

5. Livestock Management: Livestock would continue to be grazed under the same management system as they have in the past. Actual livestock numbers may vary depending on vegetative and economic conditions. The number of livestock licensed would be reduced from 65 AU's to 52 AU's. No adverse impacts are anticipated

6. Visual resources: The preferred action would not affect the form or color of the landscape, or the primary aspect of the vegetation within the allotment.

7. Water Quality: Direct impacts to surface water quality would be minor, short-term impacts during stormflow. Indirect impacts to water-quality related resources, such as fisheries, would not occur. The proposed action would not have a significant effect on ground water. Livestock would be dispersed over the allotment, and the soil would filter potential contaminants.

8. Air Quality: Air quality would be between the levels of the proposed action and the no grazing alternative. It would remain within limits allowed for Class II areas.

9. Recreation: Grazing should have little or no affect on the recreational opportunities in this allotment. Recreation activities that could occur within this grazing allotment are limited or non-existent due to land patterns and the inadequate marking of public land boundary lines.

## V. Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impacts of the grazing and no grazing alternatives were considered in Chapter 4 of Rangeland Reform '94 Draft Environmental Impact Statement and in Chapter 4 of the Roswell Resource Area Proposed RMP/EIS. The no livestock grazing alternative was not selected in either document.

On the allotment specific level, there will be no cumulatively significant impacts from the proposed action or from the no grazing alternative.

## VI. Residual Impacts

The area has been grazed by livestock since the early part of the 1900's, if not longer. Vegetative monitoring studies have shown that grazing, at the current permitted numbers of animals, is sustainable. If the mitigation measures are enacted, then there would be no residual impacts to the proposed action.

## VII. Mitigating Measures

Vegetation monitoring studies will continue to be conducted and the licensed number of livestock will be adjusted, either up or down, as necessary. If new information surfaces that livestock grazing is negatively impacting other resources, action will be taken at that time to mitigate those impacts.

## FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT/RATIONALE

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT: I have reviewed this environmental assessment including the explanation and resolution of any potentially significant environmental impacts. I have determined the **preferred action** will not have significant impacts on the human environment and that preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required.

Rationale for Recommendations: The proposed action would not result in any undue or unnecessary environmental degradation. The **preferred action** will be in compliance with the Roswell Resource Management Plan and Record of Decision (October, 1997).

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T. R. Kreager, Date
Acting Assistant Field Office Manager - Resources
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